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ABSTRACT

This paper describes two universities with very different expectations about undergraduate research and makes the case that undergraduate research can be supported through a change in the metaphors by which it is described. At one university, research by undergraduates is not encouraged and expectations for such research are low. At the other, there is a very high expectation of undergraduate research, and many undergraduates are encouraged to present papers. The first line of attack in any effort to develop or strengthen undergraduate research efforts is to eliminate the metaphors that limit thinking about supporting undergraduate research. Especially limiting are Darwinian metaphors that stress competition and the struggle for funding for research projects. (SLD)

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Abdul Karim Bangura

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Metaphors of Expectations for Undergraduate Research: A Tale of Two Universities

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Introduction

This paper chronicles the story of two universities' expectations of their undergraduates' abilities to engage in substantive research and how those expectations are manifested in the metaphors that are common currencies on their campuses. University X, which has a low expectation of its undergraduates engaging in research, exemplifies "doubting Thomas" metaphors (a la St. Thomas who refused to believe on several occasions when told that Jesus rose from the dead), "self-fulfilling" metaphors (those that reflect a prediction that comes true not because it was right but simply because it was made in the first place), and "affiliation motive" metaphors (those that indicate the desire to be around other people and have close relations with them, or "misery loves company"). Thus, even after eight years of active participation in the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) and three consecutive years (1997-1999) of the being the most published academic institution in the faculty refereed *NCUR Proceedings*, this university refuses to fund this endeavor. Nonetheless, it is not bashful of using the student researchers' successes in its public relations activities. However, the lack of appreciation and

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support from the administration has made a once energized and dedicated faculty so discouraged that members are no longer working with potential student authors on their research projects. The consequences have been quite obvious: in 2001, only four of the university's students' papers were published in the *NCUR Proceedings*; in 2002, only one student's paper was published; and none is expected for this year (2003).

University Y, which has a very high expectation of its undergraduates' abilities to engage in substantive research, manifests "achievement motive" metaphors (those that urge to attain optimal levels on important tasks) and "certainty motive" metaphors (those that express the desire to feel at home, to know where one stands). It is not surprising, therefore, that this university, in just its fourth year of participation, is enthusiastically supporting and funding 73 of its undergraduate students to present papers at this year's (2003) NCUR. It is also not surprising that this university has been the most published academic institution in the faculty refereed *NCUR Proceedings* for the past two years (2001-2002) and is poised to do the same in this year (2003). Moreover, a special session on undergraduate research was held at this university's annual teachers' conference to discuss best practices for undergraduate research.

The essence of this story is that metaphors are not just "more picturesque speech." That we live by and through metaphors is hardly a matter of dispute. Thus, the first line of attack in any concern about developing and/or strengthening undergraduate research programs must be against those images and metaphors that blind and govern so much of our thinking. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put it,

> The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor (1980:3).

Given the preceding excerpt then, we should be horrified by the metaphors that are the currency of everyday discourse about undergraduate research in certain academic circles. We hear again and again about undergraduate research as an activity that "does not deserve priority funding," that is not appropriate in a "traditional teaching

institution," that it is a "thankless, unappreciated and uncompensated exercise," and that "research should be best left to graduate students and professors." Some students who engage in undergraduate research are often thought of as "incapable of doing the work" (implying that others must have written their papers); others are advised to "concentrate on developing basic skills that will allow them to get entry-level positions upon graduation." Certain academicians even believe that "most students are not interested in research because they don't like to stand out." Thus, the greater fosus of this paper is on the metaphors that are common currency in academic institutions such as University X.

Unholy Discourse

Every discipline or profession, suggests one of the world's eminent scholars of ethics, Robert Solomon (1992:22), possesses its own self-glorifying vocabulary: Politicians hold dearly the concept of "public service," even while they seek personal power and exploit the fears and prejudices of the voters; lawyers defend our "rights" on a handsome contingency basis as they lead us through a myriad of regulations and liabilities they created; professors talk about what they do in the noble language of "truth and knowledge," even though they spend most of their time and energy battling one another for status in exquisitely vicious campus politics. On a few occasions, these battles can be deadly.

As Lennard Davis, a professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton, recounts in his *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "The Uses of Fear and Envy in Academe," "A few years ago, an Oxford don finally decided to take action against a rival professor: He killed him." Davis adds that "Fortunately, murder is still fairly rare in academe, but enough backstabbing goes on in the profession to put Jacobean tragedy to shame. The public tends to think of academics as hyper-rational creatures, but the fact is that they live their careers through their emotions" (1999:B8).

Among the most damaging myths and metaphors in academic discourse are those macho Darwinian concepts of "survival of the fittest" and "it's a jungle out there." The underlying notion, of course, is that life in academe is competitive, and it is not always fair. But that obvious pair of points is very different from the "dog-eat-dog" and "every man for himself" imagery that is routine in academic affairs. It is true that academic relations are and must be competitive, but it is not true that they need to be

cutthroat or cannibalistic or that "an individual has to do whatever it takes to survive." Of course some of the metaphors are charming--a hardworking and accomplished professor who motivates and gets the most out his undergraduate students is a "prima donna," and an unyielding professor is an "astute fox" or a "ferocious lion." However, most of them are demeaning. Some professors who tout the successes of their undergraduate students are called "show offs," "snakes-in-the-grass," "rats," and a wide variety of rodents. Departments in turn are modeled as "fish-tanks," "snake-pits," and "cat-fights," and sometimes it is the botanical image of the jungle itself that gets invoked. Besides being bad biology and undoubtedly unfair to the animals, the jungle metaphors are particularly bad for academic relations, which are (or should be) anything but uncivilized, devoid of rules, and ruled by killer instinct.

However competitive a particular group may be, it always rests on a foundation of shared interests and mutually agreed-upon rules of conduct, and the competition takes place not in a jungle but in an academic setting that it presumably both serves and depends upon. Life in academe, unlike life in the mythological jungle, is first of all fundamentally cooperative. It is only with the bounds of mutually shared concerns that competition is possible. And quite the contrary to the "every man for himself" metaphor, academic relations almost always involve cooperative and mutually trusting groups of individuals, not only individuals themselves but networks of people. Academicians who behave like animal taskmasters may boast of their effectiveness, but much more likely colleagues are poisoned by fear and resentment and stagnant from the resulting excess of caution and hostility.

Competition is essential in academe, but to misunderstand this as unbridled competition is to undermine ethics and misunderstand the nature of competition too. It is not only to misunderstand academic relations, but it is probably to misunderstand Darwin and jungles as well. As biologist Clifford Geertz (1975) makes the point, a homo sapiens deprived of a community and a culture is a pathetic, virtually helpless animal. Indeed, a comparatively gigantic brain is of little value without the hand-me-downs of successive generations and the ability to cooperate and organize through language. It would be odd if one of the most dramatic contributions to human evolution by academics was a mini-world in which the accumulated benefits of thousands of years have been set aside in favor of a self-destructive intra-species competition that most of the animal world has more widely set aside.

Similar to the Darwinian metaphor, but even more macho and more in tune with the

collective nature of most human aggression and competition in academe, is the familiar "war" metaphor that we hear. It has often been pointed out that the hierarchical structure of academic institutions not only resembles but is modeled after a military chain of command. However, as military ethicist Anthony Hartle (1989) suggests, the military perspective and consequently military metaphors are intrinsically alarmist, pessimistic, conservative, and authoritarian. In academe, bureaucratic chauvinism replaces academic freedom; members of a departmental anti-student empowerment clique are referred to as "troops" and those who put students first become "the enemy." Obedience is often rewarded in spite of its stupidity. Courses of action are typically called "plans of attack," "battle strategies," and "campaigns." But conducting academic affairs is not a "battle," and academic competition, even when the survival of a department is at stake, should not be confused with the mutual destructiveness of war. The object of academic competition is to produce the best and the least expensive ideas, products, and services. The point is not to wipe out a person's competitors. For academic competition to make sense, the larger interests of each member and those of the students and the academic institution at large must be kept in mind. They and not the battleground or the war room are the test and determinant of success.

While it is true that it is hard to think quite so holistically when an individual's livelihood is on the line and that individual's future is uncertain, it is also true that the difference between keeping the larger picture in mind and doing so may well be the difference between, on the one hand, experiencing the rigors of competition and the time and energy it requires as part and parcel of an academic institution's proper productive role in society and, on the other hand, finding the whole enterprise to be meaningless and being tempted by one of those all-too-readily-available illegalities. After all, is it not all fair in love and war? The answer to this rhetorical question, of course, is NO, and since ancient times war has been limited by chivalric canons and other codes of honor. If conducting academic affairs does on occasion seem like going to war, academic relations presuppose a certain amount of mutual trust and cooperation, the honoring of agreements, respect for laws and the rules of fair competition, no matter how vigorous the competition may be. The virtues of academic relations are not military virtues, despite the importance of obedience and the onset of hostility.

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